

In the past year French Premier Jacques Chirac has brought home eight of his countrymen held hostage in Lebanon. No Americans have emerged into the sunlight of freedom since the Iran-contra scandal hit the headlines last December.

The Paris government can claim no clean sweep. A handful of its citizens remain captive. The stories told by the pair of Frenchmen released this week create further concern for those still held hostage, chained and sometimes blindfolded: locked up in bleak aloneness.

M. Chirac is receiving stiff criticism from French politicians, right and left. The terms met to deliver the captives transgressed against all the high-flown rhetoric unleashed five months ago when Paris broke diplomatic relations with Teheran. I was in France that July weekend.

On a table nearby lies a collection of Paris newspapers. Somehow "never" sounds much more final when translated *jamais*. Reviewing the quotes may not be fair, and the fear of having their own words summoned up against them may be a major cause for the politicians' reaction to M. Chirac's success. After all, the French are in the middle of a presidential election campaign.

In July, with a united, thundering voice, all French parties and individuals of any importance declared there would be no compromise with the Khomeini regime. The Iranian embassy was ringed by a well-armed circle of tough security police. Inside was a man Teheran described as a diplomatic interpreter, whom the French accused of playing a major role in terrorist bombings.

This week the blockade barriers came down. The police returned to barracks. The interpreter-terrorist boarded a plane, after submitting to a routine body-check at the airport. At the same time, the head of France's diplomatic mission departed Teheran, released of criminal charges lodged in July by the Iranian regime.

Significantly, the hostages came home first, before the stand-off between the two governments resulted in a stand-down.

Unlike the White House amateurs who "masterminded" U.S. participation last year in the weapons dealings, M. Chirac's negotiators demanded the Khomeini regime deliver first on its promises to use its influence to free hostages.

Supposedly, the French read the Tower Commission report, to provide guidelines for how not to deal with Teheran. Although I doubt that, with its previous experience in the Middle East, Paris needed the primer on arrogant ineptitude.

And if you wonder at the use of "arrogant," then consider the bluff and bluster maintained by the Reagan administration at the same time it was dealing under the table: the constant repetition of the theme that America would never stoop to trading for its

hostages. The French simply omitted that assertion.

Paris never lost track of its national responsibility to deliver its nationals out of bondage, by any and every means. In all the rhetoric last summer the French hostages were never mentioned.

His own presidential ambitions may have contributed to M. Chirac's agreeing to the swap; it doesn't matter. His political rivals' sniping was all but drowned out in the nation's joy over having its fellow citizens home.

Still outstanding is \$660 million owed Iran on a loan made by the late shah. The French have offered, but not yet handed over, half the amount due.

The importance that should be attached to the money is that it gives Paris leverage for more bargaining to spring its remaining hostages. At any rate, it can be considered no ransom, but payment for a loan, a legal obligation which must be met eventually.

All but lost in the White House rush to furnish deadly arms to Teheran last year was the fact that Washington still controls millions also owed Iran, under all existing international conventions.

Of course, the U. S. could not use the money to bargain for its hostages because the administration had sold the American public the poppycock that it would never countenance treating with terrorists.

President Reagan somehow believed that open discussions with the hostages' captors would be tantamount to bestowing legitimacy on their savage brutality. The myopia of that logic always frustrated me.

After all, when police counsel victims' families to attempt to reach agreement with kidnappers, no one suspects they are condoning the criminals or their crimes. The first obligation is to free the victims. This was the principle which motivated Premier Chirac and his advisers. Bravo!

It can only be hoped that some of the Gallic good sense will take root in the Reagan administration, as it heads into its final year. The president owes his successor a maximum effort at cleaning up all outstanding messes before stepping down.

While the list of unresolved problems is not short, the American hostages in Lebanon deserve the highest priority, in the name of simple humanity. The French have shown the way.

What is our choice? I am reminded how the British Empire followed America's present line, in refusing to ransom English men and women seized in the great Sudan religious uprising in the 19th century. London eventually triumphed, but not for 15 years. The few survivors were scarcely human beings.

As we head into this holiday season, eight Americans held in Lebanon deserve our prayers, and much more. From their government, they have a right to expect this Christmas will be their last spent in unholy submission to fanatical gangs.

Whatever it takes.

Roy Meachum

Free

the hostages

